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Going Local: Creating Unique and Special Collections in an Academic Library

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Abstract

Over the past two years, the University of British Columbia–Okanagan Library has undertaken a review to update their special collections and focus on the local geographical areas and targeted populations. From this, a localized, accessible, and unique collection has emerged that can better serve the students and faculty on campus, as well as community user groups in the area. This project helped to grow the community engagement focused strategic direction of the university and increase the visibility of the library in the surrounding community through building new relationships.

This paper will focus on examining the roles libraries can play in developing targeted and focused special collections, drawing from recent experience in reimagining and expanding an existing special collections section within a newer academic campus library. It is hoped that this paper can spark considerations of the impact special collections can have on the strategic goals of a library or university or college, and on the roles and responsibilities academic libraries have in preserving local history.

Preface: A version of the history, project overview, and results section has been published by the Okanagan Historical Society. Berringer, H., Gattrell, J., & Lomness, A. (2015). Special collections at the University of British Columbia's Okanagan Campus Library: Expanding our community's access to local history. In D. Gregory (Ed.), *Okanagan history: The seventy-ninth report of the Okanagan Historical Society* (pp. 106–113). Kelowna, BC: Okanagan Historical Society.

Introduction

Special collections remain common among academic institutions, ensuring that rare and unique materials are preserved for long-term availability. Over the course of the past two years, we, the University of British Columbia (UBC) Okanagan Library, have been reimagining how special collections are defined on our own campus and specifically how they are tied to the local community engagement endeavours of our library. The following is an overview of the history of the campus, the project and its results, and relevant literature consulted while creating goals for the project and following its completion.

History

In 2005, UBC expanded to include a second campus in Kelowna, British Columbia, taking over one of the existing campuses of the Okanagan University College (OUC) (Mortenson, 2005). Over the past ten years, the Okanagan campus has become increasingly integrated into the local community and has settled into its Okanagan Valley surroundings. While a form of special

collections has been a part of the UBC Okanagan Library since our inception, it was not until 2012 that there was a strong desire for change; a call to reimagine and refocus our special collections to match the campus's emerging role in the community.

With the creation of a new campus came much of the research collection materials previously held on the same site by OUC. During the transition, both circulating and special collections were reviewed and divided based on content type, relation to teaching and learning, and space. The result for special collections was a variety of print monographs that did not carry a strong focus, nor a foundation for future growth. Limited acquisitions criteria allowed for almost anything to be deemed worthy of being placed in the newly minted campus collections.

Over the first several years, the monograph-focused special collections was moved around the library building, residing in many different spaces. First, the collection was held in a room designed with purpose-built cabinets to house the materials. Doubling as a silent study space for

students, this room offered access to the collection at any given time. As we moved through a period of renovation in 2012, the room that once held this collection was removed, and the materials were displaced into a storage closet in a locked hallway. Day-to-day access was no longer an easy task, and often required patrons to schedule access to use the materials. The visibility, accessibility, and usefulness of the collection, which we had long been offering to our patrons, had decreased. It was time to push forward, change, and reimagine the collection, not just in terms of its past, but what it could be for the campus, for the institution, and for the local community.

Project Overview

The project itself, to revitalize the special collections, began in the fall of 2013, with the hope of designing a collection that would serve to match the goals and priorities of our library, the strategic directions of the university, and the needs of the community members looking to access research materials. The landscape of the region was also taken into account when analyzing and brainstorming what the UBC Okanagan Special Collections (OSC) would look like.

One of UBC's main strategic directions/pillars for the institution was to commit to promoting high impact and locally focused community engagement practices. More specifically for the library, our patron groups were driving this intention. Not only did we serve our campus community—students, faculty, staff, etc.—but also our community patrons, who relied on accessing materials in our library that otherwise could not be found locally. Making available resources that were coming through document delivery from the main campus reinforced the need for an initiative to better serve the research needs of the area—focusing on providing the locally produced and focused materials to those living in or visiting the area. With limited preservation-driven post-secondary institutions in the area of the province, it was important to ensure that the historical values of the local region were being retained and maintained.

We began first by mapping out the local collections focus at institutions throughout the province. Most of the major regional areas were being covered in existing special collections. Regarding the areas that were remaining, we had conversations with other academic institutions to better understand their situation and goals and to ensure that there was comprehensive coverage without overlap. Following the preliminary mapping of the province, we considered what we as a library wanted to include in our goals for the project. We wanted to ensure that all monographic titles, serials, maps, and other materials published in or about the Okanagan-Similkameen area were being covered in our plan for the reimagined collections. In addition, we wanted to bring in pieces from our campus community, highlighting unique publications and projects from students and faculty. Through the analysis of the existing holdings and extensive collections development endeavours with the main campus's rare books and special collections (RBSC), we were able to create a robust collection of materials to make available locally to those patrons seeking to research the community.

Next steps included opening a new accessible space where anyone could visit and use the collections, tearing down the boundaries that had been created only a few years prior. In addition, we strove to create an atmosphere that was inviting to patrons and worthy of showcasing our holdings. Open-facing glass cabinets, hung photographs, and displayed artifacts make for a vibrant space worthy of highlighting the locally focused materials. We received additional funding to put toward having two dual master's of library and archival studies co-op students. During their time with us, they were able to work on identifying and acquiring monographs to address gaps in our collections and arrange and describe our first two community donated archival collections, respectively.

While our initial intention was to focus only on locally published materials, by the end of the project, we had expanded to encompass unpublished items, archival holdings, and artifacts. As we move forward, there is an ongoing commitment to preserving the local community's

history, moving now into the realm of digitizing photographic collections that document the multitude of industries and families from the region's history.

Results

The beneficial outcomes of this project on our library have highlighted the importance of local collections in academic libraries. The level of engagement that has ensued and positive feedback received has created a space that is welcoming to visitors and is worthy of long-term impact in the local and campus communities.

In creating our special collections, partnerships were a foundation and should be a driving force behind any locally focused collection. The work that we have been able to do with other academic institutions in the province has laid the groundwork for future relationships and preservation activities that might arise. For example, through conversations with colleagues at one of the province's colleges, it was determined that due to space concerns they were no longer able to preserve all of the history from the Kootenay-Boundary region of the province. It was agreed that the OSC would preserve any donated material documenting or published in this nearby region. Internal partnerships with units on the Vancouver campus have also furthered the goals of the project; from collections development conversations with RBSC, to digitization initiatives with the UBC Digitization Centre, we have been able to promote ourselves as a fixture in the Okanagan-Similkameen region.

Another valuable outcome of building the OSC has been our outreach endeavours. Speaking to community members, societies, and local historical committees have all offered the opportunity to interact with a patron group that we do not always regularly encounter in academic libraries. In addition, being able to host special collections focused events in our spaces has given them the opportunity to come in and see the collections firsthand. The reciprocal trust that has

been developed ensures that the ongoing growth of the collections is supported both on campus and in the community.

Throughout the process of developing the locally focused collections, we had the added advantage of receiving gift-in-kind donations. As mentioned above, the overall collections became more robust over the course of the project; much of that had to do with the community's increased investment in donating materials to the OSC. Countless members of the community generously donated rare and out-of-print monograph titles, along with much more—including photographic collections, unpublished pamphlets, and other unique and original items.

The added advantages to the on-campus community have included the addition of study space and the integration of the special collections into teaching and learning. Study space has always been a precious commodity on our campus, and with the creation of a larger space for the OSC in the library we wanted to ensure that students had access to the silent area. Since the opening of the space, students have used the area on a daily basis. Additionally, the space and the materials have begun to be incorporated into teaching and learning on the campus, another strategic direction for the Okanagan Library. Students are using the historical materials to document how historical research moves from primary to secondary source material in the local area and to see firsthand how history is being preserved. Overall, it has been reassuring to see the collections reaching broad patron groups and supporting the strategic initiatives set out by our university.

The results of the project have far surpassed the original intent we had when looking to revitalize our existing collections. They have demonstrated the overarching importance of documenting the local history and supporting other community-focused initiatives, both locally and more broadly, which cover similar topics. This process highlighted the importance of using the

partnerships and goals driven from an institution's strategic direction to facilitate unique and special collections in academic libraries.

Literature Review

The literature surrounding special collections and archives in academic libraries has spanned many decades. For the purposes of this project, both before and after, we were most interested in discovering instances where academic libraries had also looked to reimagine or refocus their special collections, or had created collections, over the past few years, targeted at documenting the history of the local community around their institution. We found a shortage of literature directly relating to these topics, presumably since many special collections have been founded earlier in an institution's history. Much of the literature is related to incorporating special collections into teaching and learning and also about reinforcing partnerships and supporting strategic goals.

Most closely related to our situation was an article around the acquisition of three special collections at the Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT), based in Ireland (Darbey & Hayden, 2008). The case study documents the steps the library took in acquiring these collections, the reasoning behind their importance, and the factors involved in preserving and storing them long term (Darbey & Hayden, 2008). The fact that institutions frequently acquire collections without a strong intention of making them available quickly or possibly ever was observed (Darbey & Hayden, 2008). This is still a factor for donations that we receive. Our processing of monograph acquisitions is quick and straightforward, usually taking up to a couple of weeks to complete, while our archival holdings require more attention to detail, supplies, and long-term project time. Fortunately, we have been able to apply student work hours to helping make these collections available. If this additional support had not arisen, the scale of our donations acceptance could have decreased. The estimated time that it would take to process a collection should be considered before accepting any donation in order to avoid a situation where the items would remain unprocessed and unused in a backlog.

Aligning with the strategic directions of both the library and the academic institution should be considered overwhelmingly important whenever beginning a new project, whether that be building a special collections or another venture. Germano and Stretch-Stephenson (2012) discuss goal setting and the benefits this exercise can have on aligning a project with the strategic directions of the institution or library, as well as the possibility of failure if goals are very clearly unattainable. In relation to the WIT example above and similarly tied to our creation of a more defined special collections, goal setting can truly make or break a project. Without direction, whether that is the goals of the academic institution, those of the library, or simply those of a team within the library, a project could miss the mark. Other literature also discusses the broader impact of a library's structure on its projects in relation to how closely it has updated and reimagined itself alongside the academic institution (Nutefall & Chadwell, 2012; Franklin, 2009). Libraries must be willing to adjust and change in order to respond to the needs of the patrons. Finally, Harris and Weller (2012) state that special collections can be prominent outreach opportunities, a goal that is consistently included in strategic directions of many academic institutions. Seeing these collections as opportunities only broadens their purpose and helps to ensure their future.

Teaching and learning was also represented throughout the literature in various forms. In particular, it was argued that library instruction for special collections is distinct from regular library instruction and should be treated as such, focusing on celebrating the differences (Samuelson & Coker, 2014). Our own endeavours to educate students on campus using the materials in our special collections have mimicked this approach. The assignments vary in form from regular information literacy (i.e., our Library Introduction session to first-year English classes), instead working to create an environment of hands-on and practical knowledge learning. Carter and Whittaker (2015) comparatively explain that special collections are making a move beyond preservation to be represented throughout the research process, and they certainly hold educational value on an academic campus. In

addition, they touch on elements around locally focused collections, emphasizing the need for “destination collections,” or collections that will draw visiting researchers to use them (p. 361). Not only are these collections valuable in educating the campus community about the region right outside its doors, but also the larger community outside the institution.

While literature was challenging to find in relation to our exact situation, elements of previous case studies and research provided valuable justification for our approach to the project, both from the onset and after completion. Overall, we see that special collections are an evolving piece of academic libraries, and one that can certainly be used to our advantage.

Future Considerations

The following are future considerations that we were unable to cover in the scope of the original project and literature review. These considerations fall into two categories: how can we more thoroughly investigate the role academic library special collections can play within their local and campus communities, and more specifically, how do special collections evolve in relation to the similar collections of other local preservation bodies.

- What do we need to be doing to ensure we are effectively meeting the needs of the regional community (i.e., ongoing consultation, surveys, focus groups, etc.)?
- To what extent should we be collecting everything versus creating more

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specialized and focused collections in academic libraries?

- How best can we be promoting the use of these collections in the classroom?
- How can we break down barriers and misconceptions around special collections to better promote access for students?
- Is there a broader place for academic libraries to be taking on local collections that otherwise might live in a community archives or museum?
- In “academic towns” where community archives or museums may not exist, is there a greater need to facilitate creating special collections?

Conclusion

As mentioned previously, the overall project came to include much more than expected. Advantageous goals, partnerships, and donations helped to shape the locally focused special collections into what it is today. Understanding the ongoing nature of our commitments within the library has helped to spark new goals and has reinforced the alignment with the institution’s strategic directions. As the literature reinforces, strategically based goals can help to increase outreach, teaching and learning, and partnerships both on and off a campus. We hope that our special collections will continue to grow and positively impact both the campus and the local community.

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